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Rehberg: Extracting natural resources

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By ALAN CHOATE
The Daily Inter Lake

LIBBY — Extracting natural resources will go a long way toward solving economic woes in Western Montana, U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., told Libby-area residents Tuesday night.

"We turned our backs on what brought us here — the high-paying jobs" in mining and timber, Rehberg said. "We're a natural resource economy, whether we like it or not."

That doesn't mean Montana can't also have a "clean manufacturing" future in technology and other indus-

tries with a small environmental footprint, he added — but the state doesn't have the infrastructure for that yet.

Promoting resource extraction industries would fill the economic gap, he said: "We quit one job before we had the other one lined up. The chasm between those jobs is pretty deep."

His message fell on friendly ears in Libby. Though much of Rehberg's "listening session" at City Hall was spent discussing the asbestos cleanup from W.R. Grace & Co.'s defunct vermiculite mine, people also said they worried about the area's weak economic base.

Young people leave and don't come back and businesses aren't moving in, several speakers said.

Rehberg spoke briefly about touring a Revett Silver Co. (formerly Sterling Mining) mine near Troy that may reopen as soon as October.

The silver and copper mine was owned by Asarco Inc. when it closed in 1993 because of low metals prices, but a rebounded market has made mining economically feasible again, if the project gets Montana Department of Environmental Quality approval.

The quality of the asbestos cleanup drew the most attention, however. Libby is a Superfund site for EPA cleanup.

will help economic woes

The EPA has identified 1,300 structures in the Libby-Troy area that need asbestos-tainted vermiculite removed. Workers had completed 200 cleanups by the end of 2003. The program has struggled with budget cuts, however, that affect how long and how thorough the cleanup will be.

Gordon Sullivan, the technical adviser for Libby's Superfund cleanup, said on-site research needs to be done on exposure limits to prevent more asbestos problems in the future.

"We don't even know if, under the OSHA standards, the workers are protected," he said.

Other people questioned cleanup

methods.

For example, cleaning asbestos out of old houses costs as much as or more than tearing the houses down, and some of the deadly substance remains when the structures are left in place.

That asbestos probably will infect the community years from now when the houses are remodeled or destroyed, Sullivan said.

"We're looking at a future in Libby that could echo our past," he said. "We've got one shot to do it right."

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